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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002357

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

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TAGS: PGOV PINR KDEM KJUS TH

SUBJECT: RESHUFFLED CABINET UNLIKELY TO ALTER TONE OF THAI POLITICS

REF: A. BANGKOK 2302 (MOTHERLAND LEADER WITHDRAWS)

1B. BANGKOK 2276 (TEJ APPOINTED AND NEW COURT CASE)

1C. BANGKOK 2243 (THAKSIN PREDICT UNITY GOVT)

1D. BANGKOK 2111 (NOPPADON AND CHAIYA OUT)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) In a cabinet reshuffle announced on August 2, Prime Minister Samak, among other moves, demoted his Commerce Minister, returned to the cabinet a Minister who had been forced from office by a recent court ruling, appointed a former Police Chief as Interior Minister, and retained three officials who are defendants in a Thaksin-era "dereliction of duty" case. Samak retains support from the Motherland Party, whose Party Leader resigned from the cabinet last week. The reshuffle does not significantly alter the character or image of Samak's administration. End Summary.

WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT

12. (U) The RTG on August 2 announced the following changes, already approved by the Palace, to the Samak administration:

- Former Royal Thai Police Chief Kowit Wattana replaced Chalerm Yoobamrung as Interior Minister. Kowit has also taken on a concurrent position as Deputy Prime Minister. Chalerm no longer holds a cabinet position.

- Man Patthanothai, who had been Information and Communication Technology Minister, has taken on a concurrent position of Deputy Prime Minister. (Note: The cabinet will revise the Deputy Prime Ministers' areas of responsibility in the near future. End Note.)

- Mingkwan Sangsuwan, who had been Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister, now serves solely as Industry Minister -- the position previously held by Motherland Party Leader Suwit Khunkitti, who announced his resignation on July 29 (ref A).

- Charawat Charnveerakul, who had been Social Development

and Human Security Minister, has become Public Health Minister, taking the position that Chaiya Sasomsab vacated after a recent Constitutional Court ruling (ref D).

- Chaiya Sasomsab returned to the cabinet, taking Mingkwan Sangsuwan's portfolio as Commerce Minister.

- Anusorn Wongwan, who had been Minister of Culture, took Charawat Charnveerakul's former position as Social Development and Human Security Minister.

- Somsak Kiatsuranond entered the cabinet, replacing Anusorn Wongwan as Minister of Culture.

- Pichai Naripathapun entered the cabinet, replacing Ranongrak Suwannachawee as Deputy Finance Minister. Ranongrak no longer holds a cabinet position.

- Pichet Tancharoen entered the cabinet, replacing Viroon Tejapaibul as Deputy Commerce Minister. Viroon no longer holds a cabinet position.

- Prasong Kosittanond entered the cabinet, replacing Sitthichai Kowsurat as Deputy Interior Minister. Sitthichai no longer holds a cabinet position.

- Suchart Thada-Thamrongvech entered the cabinet in a newly-created Deputy Finance Minister position.

**¶3. (C)** Notably, Samak retained in their positions the three cabinet members who recently became defendants in a "dereliction of duty" case involving the establishment of a state lottery: Deputy Prime Minister/Finance Minister Surapong Suebwonglee, Labor Minister Uraiwan Thienthong, and

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Deputy Transportation Minister Anurak Jureemart. When the Supreme Court accepted this case for trial (ref B), there was a widespread perception that the three would have to resign their seats. Samak himself had said he would not finalize his reshuffle before knowing whether the Supreme Court would accept that case for trial.

COMMENT: NO MAJOR CHANGE OF TONE

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**¶4. (C)** While Kowit and Suchart have relevant professional expertise (see bios below), the reshuffle is unlikely to change the overall image of the cabinet. The balance of political party representation remains virtually the same. Samak did not form a government of national unity (contrary to Thaksin's prediction, reported in ref C). Nor did he bring in a group of esteemed technocrats in the model of recently-appointed Foreign Minister Tej Bunnag (ref B). Of all the new appointments, the most significant is Kowit's; we are not certain how Kowit's appointment may affect the security situation in the South, but Chalerm -- Kowit's predecessor -- acted as a lightning rod for criticism of the Samak administration and seemed to bring little to the table. Kowit's appointment also signals that efforts initiated by the Surayud administration to reduce Police influence, which have been little discussed of late, have scant prospect of revival. End Comment.

BIOS OF NEW CABINET MEMBERS

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**¶5. (C)** The figures new to the cabinet are:

- KOWIT WATTANA (Deputy PM/Interior Minister): Kowit, born in 1947, served 27 years in the Police, spending much of that in the Border Patrol Police and rising to become Border Patrol Police Commissioner in 1994. Kowit was appointed Assistant Police Commissioner in 1998, Deputy Commissioner in 2000, and Commissioner in 2004. He graduated in the same Pre-Cadet School class as coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin, but he was

widely seen as a reluctant member of the Council for Democratic Reform, the group of coup leaders who deposed Prime Minister Thaksin in September 2006. Kowit was removed from his position as Police Commissioner in early 2007, following bombings in Bangkok. Kowit's career included studies at Thailand's National Defense College, Joint Staff College National Defense Studies Institute, and the Royal Thai Army Command and General Staff College. He has not been seen as a politically partisan figure, and he does not have strong ties to a political party. He is married to Dr. Wantanee Wattana. They have two young children. Kowit has a limited ability to speak English.

- PICHAI NARIPATHAPUN (Deputy Finance Minister): Pichai, born in 1961, is a political financier and close associate of Motherland Party Leader Suwit Khunkitti. He owns a jewelry company and also is involved in real estate projects. He holds a bachelor's degree in Economics and a Master's degree in Business Administration and Accountancy, both from Chulalongkorn University.

- PICHET TANCHAROEN (Deputy Commerce Minister): Pichet, who only entered politics in 2007, is the older brother of Suchart Tancharoen, a veteran politician who served on the Thai Rak Thai Party executive board. After dallying with the People's Power Party, Pichet moved over to the Motherland Party; he became a Motherland Party Deputy Leader and won election to a House seat from Chachoengsao province. Prior to entering politics, Pichet was active in the logging and construction industries.

- PRASONG KOSITTANOND (Deputy Interior Minister): Prasong, born in 1943, is a former senator from Petchaboon province. He won election to the Senate in March 2000, and he successfully re-contested election for his seat the following month after the Election Commission determined there was enough evidence of improprieties to warrant a new election. As a Senator, he served as Vice Chairman of the Senate

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Committee on Independent Organization Affairs. He is U.S.-educated, holding a Bachelor's degree in Finance from Eastern University and a Master's degree in Marketing from the Dallas Institute. He runs a granite and marble business and has close ties to the Motherland Party.

- SOMSAK KIATSURANOND (Minister of Culture): Born in Khon Kaen province in 1954, Somsak holds a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering from Khon Kaen University and a Master's degree in Water Resource Management from Chulalongkorn University; he also holds an honorary PhD in Political Science from a U.S. university (NFI). He began his career as an engineer with the Interior Ministry's Public Works Department but resigned from the civil service in 1980 to begin a construction business in Khon Kaen. He also owns a rice mill and a bus route concession in Khon Kaen. In the 1980s and 1990s, he won election to the House of Representatives six times, moving from the Social Action Party (SAP) to the New Aspiration Party, and then back to the SAP. In 2001 and 2005, he won election as a Thai Rak Thai candidate, and then he won a seat again in 2007 with the People's Power Party (PPP). From 1998-2001 he served as Deputy Speaker of the House, and he was elected to that position again in January 2008. He is married to Ms. Phatchana. He does not speak English fluently.

- SUCHART THADA-THAMRONGVECH (Deputy Finance Minister): Born in 1952, Suchart received a Bachelor's degree in Economics from Thammasat University, a Master's degree in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Doctoral degree from McMaster University (Canada). Prior to his appointment to Samak's cabinet, he was a lecturer in economics at Ramkhamhaeng University and an advisor to Finance Minister Surapong Suebwonglee. Suchart has also served as an advisor to then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and to other cabinet ministers, and he has held

positions on the governing committees of the Petroleum Authority of Thailand, the Security and Exchange Commission, and the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority.

JOHN